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ABSTRACT

External degree programs are those educational programs that respond to acknowledged needs in higher education: greater access to post-secondary studies, more flexible curriculum offerings, and recognition of nontraditional forms of learning. This paper describes several external degree programs at various institutions across the U.S. Some of the unique factors featured in these programs are: (1) geographically accessible learning centers; (2) few or no residency requirements; (3) student designed curricula; (4) independent study programs; and (5) work-experience programs. Certain fears surrounding the creation of external degree programs mainly concern the deterioration of academic standards that may appear as a result of too little structure. Proponents of these programs, however, feel that this is not a danger if 3 factors are in line: motivated students; adequate resources; and a process for proper guidance and rigorous assessment of the student. (HS)

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A LOOK AT EXTERNAL DEGREE STRUCTURES
by Carol Herrnstadt Shulman

External degree plans received widespread and favorable publicity in 1971. This review will discuss ways in which several recent external degree programs attempt to meet higher education needs and serve a nontraditional student population.

The phrase "external degree" does not refer to any standardized type of degree program, but is a rubric for a variety of programs designed to deal with acknowledged needs in higher education: greater access to post-secondary studies, more flexible curriculum offerings, and recognition of nontraditional forms of learning.

Although the programs described are not necessarily viewed by their sponsors as external degree programs, they have been identified by John R. Valley (18) as conforming to "modes-of-learning" and "complex-systems" models of the external degree concept. Valley identifies a mode-of-learning model as one in which:

> . . . a degree-granting and instructional institution or agency establishes a new degree pattern of learning and teaching that seeks to adjust to the capacities, circumstances, and interests of a different clientele from that which it customarily serves.

In a complex-system model, "a degree-granting institution or agency reshapes its pattern of services in various ways, sometimes by combining various needs of a different clientele."

RATIONALES FOR EXTERNAL DEGREE PROGRAMS

A new understanding of how learning in higher education occurs has given impetus to the development of external degree programs. Traditionally, residency on campus for specified periods of time was considered an integral part of the higher education experience (6). In the past, this view was appropriate because of a limited student population, relatively few teacher-scholars, and the possibility of teacher-student communication only through classroom contact (2). However, changes in these areas have given rise to the view that "learning need not be confined to a single campus or to rigid blocks of time" (2). In fact, one argument for nonresidential study is that "there is more going on that has educational significance away from the campus than can possibly be brought onto it" (16).

The recognition of the possibilities of off-campus learning coincides with increased demands for access to higher education outside the confines of the traditional 18-to-22-year-old residential student learning format, which may not have sufficient flexibility to deal with the problems of adult students (11). Generally, external degree programs are designed to meet the needs of the adult, working student, many of whom find that traditional residency requirements are an insurmountable obstacle to higher education. Potential students in the 18-to-22-year-old age group also may find external degree programs valuable if they intend to postpone their higher education for a time after high school, or if they are dissatisfied with traditional education norms (2).

Examination of various external degree programs points up concerns common to all programs. These concerns reflect the typical needs of the nontraditional student population: accessibility, individualized curriculum, and quality of the educational experience. The success of any program depends on how well these needs are served as well as on the quality of the education being offered. The programs offered exhibit a variety of approaches to meet student needs.

PROVIDING ACCESSIBILITY

Two key considerations in external degree programs are that they provide learning centers that are geographically accessible, and that they have few or no residency requirements. The programs are designed to offer learning opportunities for students in non-campus settings and in locations where campus facilities are not available. The absence of campus ties and long-term residency requirements under these programs makes higher education a feasible option for the nontraditional student.

The need for more accessible higher education has been recognized even in situations where well-developed systems of higher education exist. Both New York and California are experimenting with new forms of external degree programs to be scattered throughout their states. New York State's Empire State College (ESC) has a dual purpose—to increase accessibility and to:

> . . . test most thoroughly a model of non-residential learning . . . . Exploring . . . new approaches will

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> redefine the meaning of the college environment and the role of the residential experience. (3)

By 1973, the College plans to have developed 20 regional learning centers for nonresidential study, serving 10,000 students. Students of all ages are admitted.

In contrast, the California State University and Colleges' external degree programs, which are still in the pilot phase, are attached to already established state institutions and are limited to upper-division and graduate education programs. Each institution develops its own external degree, nonresidential program, subject to state guidelines and approval (10).

On a national level, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has developed a "University Without Walls" (UWW) that provides higher education opportunities to federal, state, and local government employees in 20 states and overseas (20). It brings together government agencies and universities interested in developing particular educational programs, and it provides the necessary expertise to enable cooperating institutions to establish off-campus degree programs. The UWW programs can be established in any location upon which a government agency and an accredited college agree. For example, Central Michigan University (CMU) offers degrees under its UWW programs to students in Washington, D.C., where all classroom experiences in the program take place. The student does not need to go to the CMU campus at all, and his degree is not distinguished from a residential CMU degree. In one regard, accessibility is limited in the UWW programs because they are directed at government employees; non-governmental people are not generally aware of available programs, and therefore only relatively small numbers of such people are enrolled.

TAILORING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Several external degree programs emphasize their function as educational innovators in the area of curriculum structure. These programs have developed methods of enabling the student, in consultation with advisors and faculty, to plan an educational program suited to his individual educational needs and goals. In planning these programs, students and advisors work out a variety of traditional learning, independent study, and work experiences.

Both the Empire State College (ESC) and Minnesota Metropolitan State College (MMSC) have the student and his advisor negotiate a formal "contract" that establishes the student's educational program and sets time limitations. At ESC, the student and his mentor work out a program that may include courses at a nearby institution, tutorials, instructional materials, and direct experiences. The program is based on the three modes of learning the ESC offers: the "Discipline" mode for specialized bodies of learning; the "Problem" mode that focuses on a major problem or issue; and the "Experience" mode that provides learning through diverse activities apart from the traditional learning resources offered by a college. The student may choose experiences from all three modes but concentrates on one.

The typical ESC contract, which is usually for a 3- or 4-month period, specifies when meetings between the student and his mentor should take place. The contract is completed by an evaluation conference in which the student, his mentor, and others cited in the plan are participants. The student renews his formal affiliation with the College when a new contract is drawn (3).

Minnesota Metropolitan State College offers a specific kind of educational experience. It was organized to serve an urban clientele and to "create an education which teaches students how to make cities work" (11). The student and his advisor negotiate a contract that will make use of the resources available in the Minneapolis-St. Paul urban area. Part of this program includes work experiences that are related to the student's goals. Time limits for access to MMSC's services are decided on an individual basis when the contract is negotiated; the contract may also be revised during the course of study (11).

Like the MMSC program, HUD's University Without Walls is generally oriented toward job goals. The curriculum for participating institutions is developed with "professionals and professional societies to help overcome limitations of in-house faculty in determining life-related educational needs, and in planning life-related curricula" (20). The student and his counselor plan a program that allows him to continue working. Courses specially designed by UWW and/or the institution are sandwiched between independent study and work experiences.

The Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities' (UECU) University Without Walls is also organized to enable the student and his "teacher-advisor" to develop an individualized learning program. The program is based on an "Inventory of Learning Resources" that each participating institution compiles. This inventory includes traditional and nontraditional learning experiences. For example, a 45-year-old oil company executive who wanted to become a high school music teacher worked out a program that included the following: 18 months of independent readings in music and weekly conferences with his advisor; 12 months of formal college courses in music, one-fourth of this time to be spent in a teaching internship; and 6 months during which one-half of his time would be spent in a teaching internship and the other half devoted to a final project (15).

THE ISSUE OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

Recognizing that external degree programs attempt to fill higher education needs, some writers still question the place these programs will or should have in American higher education (5, 17). They are concerned principally about the quality of the educational programs offered and the meaning of the degree that is conferred.

Samuel Gould, chairman of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study, which is examining all aspects of external degree programs, has cited several fears that external degrees raise:

- There is the danger of deterioration of standards.
- There is the danger of the external degree being used too much as a political instrument and too little as an educational instrument.
- There is the danger of curriculum content vagueness.
- There is the danger that in the excitement of developing new ways of delivering instruction and credentialling [sic] people, the important and needed debate over what really constitutes an educated person will continue to be postponed. (17)

Aware of these problems, external degree planners have developed procedures designed to guard against them. One proponent of the external degree programs (2) argues that

three basic factors determine the quality of any educational program: motivated students; adequate resources; and a process for proper guidance and rigorous assessment of the student. Another factor that some external degree programs also appear to include in their definition of quality is continuous self-appraisal (10, 15). Students who enroll in these programs are expected to have the determination and independence necessary to complete a self-reliant form of education, and these qualities are considered necessary to the success of the educational programs. In some programs, such as that offered at MMSC, the requisite maturity is assumed (11). The UECU's University Without Wall's institutions, which do not have open admissions but are selective, look for qualities such as student "motivation . . . independence, job history, and previous life experiences" in their applicants (15). Institutions in this UWW also recognize that students are not always familiar with independent learning. The schools generally have special orientation sessions to teach new external degree students how to work with and benefit from independent learning. Skidmore College's session lasts for a full quarter, but most are only for a few days to a week.

Although external degree "curriculum" is in large part determined by the individual student's interests and needs, some understanding of the program's quality may be developed from an examination of its organization, procedures, and resources. The programs described here have developed or are working on methods of supervision and quality control to ensure the maintenance of their professed standards of quality.

In its planning process for pilot external degree programs, the California State University and Colleges' Commission on External Degrees has established several criteria upon which it conditions its approval of proposed external degree programs:

> a. The use of regular faculty members as instructors of courses, or, at least, the use of non-campus personnel as instructors approved for that purpose by the academic department offering the course;
> b. Access to adequate library facilities and other critical instructional resources;
> c. Approval of all courses and programs by the academic procedures followed at a college for the approval of regular courses and programs. (9)

To ensure that quality is maintained in programs that have its approval, HUD's UWW conform to certain standards. All programs must go through the formal procedures for new program approval at the participating institutions and must have regional accreditation (21). The UWW has also developed a managerial system that enables an institution to run the UWW programs on an efficient basis. The director of this system has complete authority to run the UWW and is directly responsible to the administrative head of his institution (21). In addition, the UWW has developed its own curricula and courses in about 20 fields with the advice of government and industrial consultants for use by participating institutions; programs are modified for the individual student.

In its concern with quality, Minnesota Metropolitan State College's prospectus (11) emphasizes the professional background and supervision of its program. The authorizing legislation that established MMSC in 1971 required that representatives of other state colleges, junior colleges, private colleges in the state, and vocational-technical schools participate in the planning of the MMSC program. Although most of the program's faculty will be drawn from community resources, MMSC has a core faculty of college teachers who will recruit and, when necessary, train community faculty. The core faculty will also act as "educational brokers" in planning a program of studies with a student.

Evaluation procedures for examining a student's progress are built into all the external degree programs. The most difficult aspect of establishing these procedures lies in determining how to measure work or life experiences that the student brings to the program as well as how to assess the work experiences that are part of his external degree education (8). HUD's UWW has developed one approach to this problem: the student's past work and other learning experiences are evaluated by a counselor who tentatively awards credit for this background. The counselor uses guidance tables for level and field of experience developed by professionals in the area, but the student does not receive formal credit for this experience until he demonstrates his learning on a higher level through course work, examinations, or supervised work-study (20). The student's course of study is planned with his job supervisor, among others, and he is given work assignments to meet his educational goals.

The Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities' UWW has not completely worked out procedures for assessing students, and there is some criticism that institutions are awarding credit for past experiences without thoroughly investigating the student's background (8). One method developed by UWW institutions to evaluate prior experience requires the student to develop a description of reasonable expectations for a B.A. degree in his field and to correlate his learning experiences with these expectations. The student then suggests a program of additional experiences he might need to complete his degree. Staff personnel and professionals in the field decide if this program, or additions to it, satisfies degree requirements (15).

One writer is critical of the methods used for evaluating life experiences. To remedy the situation, he suggests that:

> . . . experiments conform to accepted academic standards. . . . [S]ome consideration must be given to who monitors these experiences, what quality controls apply, and how you distinguish between experiences. . . . [T]he answers are not yet available and the questions are asked too seldom. (8)

ACCREDITATION AND ACCEPTABILITY

The problem of evaluating students in external degree programs is an integral part of a larger problem for educators and potential employers: deciding what an external degree represents. Among the components of this problem are accreditation procedures; the degree's title, or institutional affiliation; and the degree's acceptance by employers and other educators.

Regional accrediting associations are beginning to grapple with the problem of assessing the quality of nontraditional programs. These associations may be crucial in assuring the validity of these programs and in winning acceptance for them. One accrediting association, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, has recently devised a new standard for external degree programs (14). It requires that the institution involved:

> . . . develop specific policies and guidelines which include admission policies with special attention to the age and maturity of the individual, his prior educational achievement and vocational and avocational experiences and to his goals and objectives. (14)

Monitoring and evaluation procedures for students should also be clearly set forth. The Southern Association also suggests that each institution call upon the Association's Commission on Colleges for advice before beginning an external degree program.

In another step toward accreditation of nontraditional programs, the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools recently granted Correspondent Status to the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities for its University Without Walls. A North Central Association's examining team reported that the UWW is:

> . . . a basic departure, a brave experiment that deserves a fair trial and respect, an undertaking that may very well become a part of higher education throughout the country. (13)

At the same time, the team noted that while the Union has not yet developed methods of measuring quality and exercising control over the institutions that are part of the University Without Walls, the UECU is attempting to solve this problem.

This discussion of accreditation for the UWW points to another question in the development of external degree programs: should these programs confer degrees that distinguish between their students' nontraditional education and traditional residential programs? Programs like HUD's UWW and the California external degree projects issue degrees that do not distinguish between residential and off-campus study. However, degrees from Empire State College, Minnesota Metropolitan State College, and the UECU's University Without Walls clearly indicate that an external degree student has received a nontraditional education.

One writer on accreditation (7) argues it is better that degrees conferred for nontraditional learning be indistinguishable from traditional degrees. He fears that special degrees "would be treated as second class . . . regardless of the quality of work demonstrated." It is too early to determine how acceptable degrees from the new external degree institutions will be, although UECU's University Without Walls reports that all its graduates thus far have been accepted into graduate school.

CONCLUSION

Educators, accrediting associations, and students of all ages are actively questioning the assumptions behind traditional higher education, thereby providing an additional incentive for making external degree programs a valid alternative in higher education. Those involved in external degree programs recognize that problems of supervision and control must be worked out and must be continuing concerns so that quality is maintained. Their awareness of this need injects an element of caution into external degree programs that may prove beneficial in changing them from generally well-received experiments into acceptable alternatives to the traditional residential college experience.

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